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ABSTRACT

The construct of self-esteem has received considerable attention in recent years. Self-esteem is defined as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes that individuals hold for themselves. This study compared self-esteem of American and Chinese children. Subjects included 446 American elementary school students from the midwest and 437 Chinese elementary school students from Taiwan. Subjects were administered the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, Form B. The Self-Esteem Rating Scale for Children was also given to the teachers for use in rating the children's self-esteem. The results indicated that American children had higher self-esteem scores than did their Chinese counterparts on both self-esteem measures. The cultural differences in self-esteem cannot be explained satisfactorily in terms of the self-effacing tendency among Chinese children. Chinese children probably receive less respectful treatment because they live in authoritarian families where the parents make the decisions and the children are expected to obey. Chinese students in unidimensional classrooms seem to have fewer opportunities for success than do American children who are more likely to be in multidimensional classrooms in which they can achieve success in many ways. (Author/ABL)

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Self-Esteem of American and Chinese Children: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This study compared self-esteem between American and Chinese children. A sample of 446 American children and a sample of 437 Chinese children were administered the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, Form B. The Self-Esteem Rating Scale for Children was also given to the teachers of these children to rate their self-esteem. The results showed that American children obtained higher self-esteem scores than did their Chinese counterparts on both self-esteem measures. Cross-cultural comparisons of environmental factors contributing to the development of self-esteem were made to explain this difference in self-esteem.

Self-Esteem of American and Chinese Children: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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The construct of self-esteem has received considerable attention in recent years, either among researchers or among educators. Self-esteem is defined as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individuals hold for themselves (Coopersmith, 1967). People with high self-esteem have self-respect and consider themselves worthy; people with low self-esteem lack self-respect and consider themselves unworthy (Rosenberg, 1979).

Very few studies have employed self-esteem measures to compare American and Chinese children. Stigler et al. (1985) studied a sample of 714 Chinese fifth graders and found that they tended to downrate their self-competence and self-worth, compared to American children. McDaniel and Soong (1981) compared 936 Chinese with 762 American primary school children. Fewer Chinese than American children felt that they had nice looking physical features, were important members of the class as well as of the family. More Chinese children felt that they were fearful of tests, were less confident in school skills, and were apprehensive about meeting new people. Using the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire, Turner and Mo (1984) compared a sample of 426 ninth graders to United States adolescents. They found Chinese youth had lower self-image than did their American counterparts on

eight of the eleven scales.

These studies generally indicate Chinese children have lower self-esteem than do their American counterparts. These findings appear to be inconsistent with current theory linking self-esteem and achievement. According to Coopersmith (1967), an important factor contributing to our self-esteem is our history of success. Harter (1981) proposes that high achievement leads to positive self-evaluations. Given this view of relationships between self-esteem and achievement, we might expect the Chinese children, who academically outperformed the American children (Stigler et al., 1982), to show more positive self-evaluations. As a group, however the Chinese children show the opposite tendency. Stigler et al. (1985) attempt to explain this inconsistency, based upon the social desirability of self-effacement in Chinese society (Bond et al., 1982). It is possible the questionnaire's requirement that children compare themselves to others might strongly activate Chinese children's self-effacing tendencies and thereby downrate their self-competence and self-worth. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that just because the Chinese children outperform American children at a group level, that this will influence within-group comparisons of themselves with other children.

The purpose of the present study was to compare the global self-esteem of Chinese and American children. Care was taken when adopting the instruments of the study to minimize within-group

comparisons so that the self-effacing tendency would not be activated among the Chinese children. Thus, in addition to a self-report type of self-esteem measure, a teacher-rating type was employed. Coopersmith and Gilberts (1982) assert that both self-report and observer-rating forms of measurement for self-esteem should be used in research.

Method

Subjects

The American sample consisted of 446 (203 males and 243 females) selected from several school districts located in small towns and cities in a midwestern state. The sample included 7 fourth-grade, 7 fifth-grade, and 7 sixth-grade classes. The Chinese sample consisted of 437 children (217 males and 220 females) selected from several elementary schools in the central part of Taiwan. This sample included 4 fourth-grade, 4 fifth-grade, and 4 sixth-grade classes.

The two cultural groups were very similar in their demographic characteristics including age, general ability, and socioeconomic status.

Instruments

Self-report questionnaire. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) Form B (Coopersmith, 1967) was used. It includes 25 items such as "I find it very hard to talk in front of the class," to which the children respond "Like Me" or "Unlike Me."

These 25 items are those items showing the highest item-total scale correlations with scores obtained from the long version (Form A) of the SEI. Higher scores correspond to higher self-esteem. Evidence for the scale's reliability and validity has been reported (Chiu, 1985).

Teach-rating scale. The Self-Esteem Rating Scale for Children (SERSC) (Chiu, 1987) was also used in the study. The SERSC consists of 12 items such as "Hesitates to speak up in class." The teacher is asked to rate his or her students on a 5-point scale for each item: "Never," "Seldom," "Occasionally," "Frequently," and "Always." Again, higher scores correspond to higher self-esteem. Evidence for the reliability and validity for the SERSC has been established (Chiu, 1987).

Both measures were translated into Chinese by the author, and then edited by two professors of education, two school teachers, and one writer of children's literature. A standard back translation method was finally employed to validate the authenticity of the original.

Procedures

Both measures were given to the teachers of selected classes in both countries at about the same time, and completed within a one month period. The SEI Form B was administered to the students, and the SERSC was completed for the students by their teachers.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of SEI Form B and SERSC scores for all subgroups, categorized according to culture, gender, and grade level.

Place Table 1 about here

There were no significant differences in self-esteem scores among the three grades within each cultural group. Consequently, a 2 x 2 analysis of variance, representing culture and gender, was performed on SEI Form B scores of the subjects, combining all grades within each cultural sample. The results showed a strong main effect of culture; American children obtained significantly higher self-esteem scores than did Chinese children (F (1,879) = 35.30, $P<.01$). Posterior comparisons indicated that American boys scored significantly higher than did Chinese boys (t = 4.44, $P<.01$), and American girls scored significantly higher than did Chinese girls (t = 3.95, $P<.01$).

Neither the main effect of gender nor the interaction effect between culture and gender reached significance.

A 2 x 2 analysis of variance was also performed on SERSC scores. Again, a strong main effect for culture was found. American children were rated significantly higher for their self-esteem than were Chinese children (F (1,879) = 54.74, $P<.01$). Posterior analyses, comparing corresponding cultural subgroups

with respect to gender, showed that American boys obtained higher ratings for their self-esteem than did Chinese boys (t = 2.40, P<.05), and American girls obtained higher ratings than did Chinese girls (t = 8.21, P<.01).

Females were rated higher than males on SERSC (F (1,879) = 9.63, P<.01). Further analyses within each cultural group indicated the sex difference was true only for the American sample (t = 4.99, P<.01). No significant sex difference was found for the Chinese sample. This tendency was also revealed by a significant interaction effect between culture and gender (F (1,879) = 15.46, P<.01).

Discussion

The results of the present study were consistent with those of previous studies that Chinese children obtained lower self-esteem scores on a self-report measure than did American children (McDaniel and Soong, 1981; Stigler et al., 1985; Turner and Mo, 1984). Furthermore, Chinese children were rated lower in their self-esteem than were American children. No sex difference in self-esteem on the SEI Form B was found. However, American girls were rated higher on their self-esteem than were American boys, whereas no sex difference in self-esteem ratings was found in the Chinese sample. These findings were also consistent with Coopersmith's findings (Coopersmith, 1981; Coopersmith and Gilberts, 1982).

The cultural difference in self-esteem can not be explained satisfactorily in terms of the self-effacing tendency among Chinese children. Because there is only one item in the SEI Form B that requires the subjects to make comparisons to others, which, according to Stigler et al. (1985), might activate Chinese children's self-effacing tendencies. As for the cultural difference in self-esteem ratings, self-effacement was unlikely to have any influence. The teachers simply were asked to rate children's behavioral manifestations in terms of frequency, not in terms of comparison with other teachers' students.

Coopersmith (1967) concludes that there are a few major factors contributing to the development of self-esteem: (1) the amount of respectful and accepting treatment an individual receives from the significant others, (2) the individual's history of success, and (3) the individual's manner of responding to devaluation. Chinese children are disadvantaged when compared to American children as far as these factors are concerned.

Chinese children probably receive less respectful treatment because they live in authoritarian families where the parents make decisions and the children are expected to obey (Chiu, 1987; Wu, 1985). Chinese classrooms are totally unidimensional in which all students work on the same academic tasks at the same pace (Stevenson et al., 1985). In this structure, social comparisons are common, competition is tough, criterion for success is narrow, and pressure for achievement is high. As Wu and Tseng put it,

"One way to measure the success of parental intervention is the ability of children to perform well in school" (1985:11). Thus, Chinese children seem to have fewer opportunities for success than do American children who are more likely to be in multidimensional classrooms where they can achieve success in many ways.

Self-concept as a learner appears to be related to a student's attribution pattern. The student with an internal locus of control for success and external locus of control for failure tends to have positive self-evaluations (Johnson, 1981). Chinese children's attribution pattern was found to be just opposite of this tendency (Chiu, 1986), probably due to the socialization process that emphasizes modesty and humility. Chinese children tend to blame themselves when they fail and give the credit to others when they succeed, and thereby limit their abilities to maintain self-esteem in the face of negative appraisals.

Based upon these comparisons and analyses, we would expect Chinese children to have lower self-esteem than do their American counterparts.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Esteem Scores on SEI Form B and SERSC

	SEI Form B				SERSC			
Grade	American		Chinese		American		Chinese	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
4th								
N	69	77	84	69	69	77	84	69
M	16.09	14.13	13.68	14.09	40.83	43.39	37.61	37.35
SD	4.94	5.48	3.58	3.53	7.97	7.76	5.88	6.37
5th								
N	72	79	62	82	72	79	62	82
M	15.11	15.85	14.39	13.76	41.50	46.10	39.98	39.41
SD	4.24	5.16	3.50	4.02	8.43	8.14	7.51	7.24
6th								
N	62	87	71	69	62	87	71	69
M	15.87	15.51	13.30	12.78	40.68	43.79	40.85	39.99
SD	5.29	4.91	3.51	3.45	7.46	6.44	5.68	5.04
Total								
N	203	243	217	220	203	243	217	220
M	15.68	15.18	13.76	13.56	41.02	44.42	39.35	38.95
SD	4.84	5.23	3.54	3.76	8.00	7.54	6.49	6.44